COMING OUT OF THE DARKNESS OF THE PAST

Dr. Paum BREEN
Language Center
Kongneung-Do, Nowon Gu
Seoul, REPUBLIC of KOREA

ABSTRACT

Technology is helping to reduce the education gap between developed countries and those that are still developing. The following article gives one example of an innovative teacher training project where a western university, in Rome, Italy, is selflessly showing their African counterparts, in rural Rwanda, how to become fully autonomous in training their future generations.

Schrum and Hong (2002) state that "learners throughout the world are demanding educational opportunities in an 'anytime and anywhere' format and institutions are responding by devoting substantial resources to develop online distance learning." This assertion is fast becoming the reality in every corner of the globe where the teaching profession is using technology to bring education to people and places that might never have imagined receiving its benefits little more than a decade ago.

Such examples include teachers working with blind children in Chile on "a project called Hyperstories which exposes blind children to a learning methodology that uses 3D sound interactive software to help them construct cognitive structures that represents their surrounding space" and "aims to move these disadvantaged blind children from darkness to what they call 'aural' vision" (Gourley, 2004).

This metaphor of technology bringing people from darkness into the light can be applied to many other contexts where professionals in the field of education are giving rather than taking from the developing world and offering hope that we can indeed create a world of shared resources and international unity, rather than division, in the future.

The benefits of technology are now helping to rebuild Rwanda, the beautiful 'Land of a Thousand Hills' and 'Gorilla's In The Mist'. Unfortunately, just over a decade ago, this densely populated, tropical nation became synonymous with less beautiful things such as ethnic cleansing, genocide and refugee crises. The war was bloody and divisive and further hindered an already impoverished nation's progress. Yet, slowly this beautiful country, in the highlands of east Africa, is successfully emerging from centuries of colonial oppression and internecine fighting to take its first steps towards becoming part of the 24/7 digital age of education.

INTRODUCTION

There's an old adage that "to give a man a fish, you feed him for a day, but give him a net and you feed him for a lifetime." If this adage is applied to the context of developing societies, one can argue that the best means of assistance is giving them control over the future of their education systems.

This is why the Rwandan government is currently investing a great deal of time and resources in improving its education system as a means of emancipating its people from the poverty and ignorance of the past.

Distance learning has been a feature of African education for decades. A significant statistic is that teacher training courses account for three quarters and a half of all distance learning education courses in Francophone and Anglophone Africa respectively. Some of the most notable achievements include the creation of the African Virtual University in 1997 and the Virtual Colombo Plan which targets poverty alleviation through the use of ICTs in education and other sectors critical to socio economic development.

Furthermore, President Mbeki of South Africa has advocated a network of distance learning centres scattered across the continent, networked with each other, with universities and with other government departments, which would facilitate the delivery of a range of development oriented educational programmes. We are talking about a continent with a passionate commitment to educating its educators, but also one that has been scarred by a history of being used as a laboratory "for educational experiments for external agencies" to paraphrase South African MP Kader Asmal in a speech at the All-Africa Ministers' Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education in 2004.

Perraton (2000), one of the leading voices in the literature on distance education for teacher training, reminds us that "good education demands good teachers" but today, in the west, there appears to be more concern with profit than pedagogy according to Noble (1998). In a stinging article on the growing proliferation of "diploma mills" that sometimes devalue genuine academic qualifications gained through years of hard work; he asserts that "Recently in the west we have seen evidence from higher education that corporate bodies are beginning to make significant in-roads into the provision of educational services." (1998). He cites the example of multinational companies such as British Aerospace setting up their own virtual universities and goes on to say that "in the United States a number of private consortia have made bids to commercialise the provision of higher education using new technologies."

Is it little wonder then that there is often scepticism about the benefits of distance education and the accreditation that it offers?

Asmal (2004) has been very strong in his criticism of this, as has Butcher (2004) and Badat (2004) who suggests that in certain scenarios developments "may well be driven by technologists and business interests rather than by educators" and talks about the need for quality assurance of distance education. He states that "in this context, a robust policy of quality assurance, with appropriate mechanisms that could include accreditation of programmes and institutional audits, is required that precludes such practices as well as enables and facilitates sound preparation for programme delivery and an innovative approach to distance education." (2004)

It's against this backdrop and in the face of these concerns that a project has been established to provide Distance Education training course for teacher trainers in Rwanda, one which uses technology for the process of teacher education as well as educating teachers in the use of technology. It may not be as ground breaking as the aforementioned project for blind children in Chile but, in a similar way, it's an example of how the affordances of technology can be used to help developing society and to fight the battle of

putting education in the hands of educators rather than corporate interests, although the latter do also have a role in helping developing societies.

This particular cross continent project, entitled 'Twese Hamwe', which translates as 'all together' is one which uses blended cooperative learning methodology, as referred to in such literature as Salmon (1998), and entails the use of an e-learning platform and formal academic lessons. This means that the course is taught half in distance mode and half in real time and is a training course for teacher trainers, achieved by online cooperative learning methodology. In practical terms the blended approach works by means of formal classes in which the lecturer explains the theoretical and methodological aspects of the course and the distance aspect involves online activities supported by the project's e-learning platform. These activities are designed to provide deeper insight into the theory explained during formal class work and also provide opportunities for interaction and collaboration among participants to carry out the activities, which has echoes of the "deep learning" approach referred to in the literature of Toohey (1999) and Motteram (2001).

This deep learning concept means that students are "more concerned with getting a thorough knowledge of the subject than in getting high marks" and is suited to high level courses that "go beyond surface discussion of issues."

The primary objectives of this project are to facilitate the growing need for education in an era of social and political reconstruction and to reduce the educational disparity existing in Rwanda between urban and rural areas. In order to achieve these objectives the project aims to foster international cooperation on an institutional level and to create a certified training course for the native teachers to set up the necessary conditions for the autonomous replication of this course.

The long term goal is to help the developing country and then leave, which is a stark contrast to the motives of many western agencies in the past. In the words of Dzvimbo (2004) it meets the standards of a "non-proprietary" learning management system and follows in the footsteps of other significant African initiatives such as that of Namibia's Policy Framework for Education which states that "Education also improves the quality of our lives by helping us develop our abilities. As we develop our own ideas and technologies we become less dependent on imported innovations and the conditions that often accompany them. As it helps us become more successful in setting and pursuing our own goals, education is liberating, both individually and socially."

To begin with, the Twese Hamwe project arose from a cooperation agreement between The Faculty of Science of Communications at La Sapienza University, Rome and the Rwandan UNATEK (University of Agriculture, Technology and Education of Kibungo.) As mentioned previously, two key aims of the project were to support UNATEK in teacher training and certification and to provide them with more modern and innovative teacher training methods. However, what sets this project apart from others, is the third, critical aspiration to involve UNATEK in the design and implementation of the programme so as to let them become independent in using the acquired knowledge in the future so that they can manage their own courses independently without the assistance of external agencies. The course is addressed to fifteen adult Rwandese teacher trainers, in their twenties and thirties, who will eventually become responsible for running such courses independently in the future. The students are predominantly male although in my opinion gender is not a factor here, an opinion supported in the literature by Giannini-Gacago & Seleka

(2005) who cite evidence from Im and Lee's (2003) study from the cyber university of North Korea and Masters & Oberprieler's (2003) study of three hundred and eleven first year Health Science students at the University of Cape Town.

According to much of the literature the e-learning aspect of the course can facilitate a form of communication that is quite untypical of anything that many students will have experienced before and this is very true in the Rwandan context where lessons are delivered in a very didactic manner in which the teachers speaks and the students listen. In this case, the students are actively encouraged to participate in the e-learning activities which are delivered through a Virtual Learning Environment, sometimes described as "a course in a box" (Collis and Moonen, 2001). There are many of these VLE platforms readily available in the digital age but the one used by this programme is MOODLE, which is an acronym for *Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment.* This allows teachers to put a wide range of materials online, including lessons, PowerPoint presentations and bulletin boards. In this way it becomes interactive for both students and teachers and allows students to work on the course at their own time and pace. Tutors can build up an almost inexhaustible range of complementary technologies around the core technology of the VLE and allow students themselves to build up an online library of resources over time.

The course began in the spring of 2006 and is designed to run until this autumn, by which time the first batch of students will have gained a deeper insight into teaching methodologies, the use of technology, the design of materials and the autonomous management of their own learning. At the outset students were somewhat apprehensive in using the technology and bashful in sharing their ideas in such a public space. Students needed to be persuaded of the benefits of technology in a measured and reassuring manner whilst accepting that this type of education is not necessarily the panacea for every educational ill. After all, Clark (1983) offers the witticism that educational technologies in themselves are "mere vehicles that deliver instruction but do not influence student achievement any more than the truck that delivers our groceries causes changes in our nutrition."

Therefore it took time to convince the students of the benefits of technology but with gentle coaxing and a lot of time and effort spent on the online socialization phase, when students and teachers get to know one another, the Rwandan students appeared to break out their shell and become active participants in the teaching and learning experience. They began to express their ideas freely and tell their stories and feel comfortable with the fact that they could talk to their tutors on a one to one, personal basis.

I strongly share the opinion of Trollip (2004) who has argued that the lessons learned in computer based education can be applied to the African context in the very same manner as the United States or Europe because even though "there are differences in resources and infrastructure, which obviously have to be taken into consideration, fundamentally the issues are the same, no matter the location." We should stop talking as if Africa is the only victim of its having been left behind in terms of global modernisation. In my opinion the developed world is also a much poorer place for its inability to harness Africa's energies and skills into something that is truly globally constructive.

 In political terms, Africa is a continent weary of one form of revolution and in the midst of another, "the digital revolution", as referred to in Gourley (2004). Yet, as stated before, there is nothing revolutionary in providing a teacher training course to African students by distance mode. The revolution comes in

providing a course that is designed to allow the trainees themselves to disseminate that course to others in the future, contradicting the traditional image that many Africans might have of western intentions to use their nations as laboratories or, worse still, dumping grounds for ideas and technologies that are becoming obsolete in their original locus.

In creating such a course it was crucial to avoid the cultural hegemony of the west that has been referred to in much of the literature on teaching English in developing societies, such as in Gourley (2004) who states that "Information is seldom value free and education is never value free." She goes on to say that it's difficult to make African students "hunger for" technological resources "in the absence of local software and content." She refers to how even political figures such as Kofi Annan have drawn attention to this "content gap" and how people, in non-western societies, accessing material "do not recognise the images and artefacts they see on the screens nor are they able to relate to the discourse or assumptions built into the texts of what they hear." (2004)

The fact that such an imbalance has profound social and learning implications led the Twese Hamwe tutors towards an approach that allowed the Rwandan students to relate lessons to their experience, particularly in the online socialisation phase, described by Salmon (1998) as being the stage "that involves individual participants establishing their online identities and then finding others with whom to interact." At this stage of the lessons tutors offered students examples of western folk stories and then encouraged them to give examples of Rwandan folk stories with similar characters or moral messages. The first of these stories was the hare and the tortoise which in Rwandan folklore becomes the elephant and the tortoise. Through exchanging ideas such as this the tutors built up a rapport with the students at a stage when "the focus of learning activities is on becoming a member of a community of practice, learning from the community but also contributing to it." (Collis and Moonen, 2001).

Today's rapid developments in technology may not be the panacea for all problems in developing countries where there are a range of equally pressing social needs such as health, crime, housing and welfare, but they offer these societies self-management that has often been denied to them in the past.

'Twese Hamwe' is offering something Africans are not familiar with, a western agency that gives them something and then goes, without taking anything back, but hopefully this is symbolic of the west's educational relationship with our African soul mates in the coming century.

It is also possible to use a project such as this to look beyond continental boundaries and consider other developing nations that might benefit from such projects. One nation, that has developmental parallels with many African states, is Bangladesh, which like Rwanda suffered greatly as a consequence of a war, with the then West Pakistan, in the early nineteen seventies. At this time many of its universities were targeted with destruction and arson and its intellectuals attacked and murdered, in a prime example of how militarists are well aware of the power of education and information. The Bangladeshi educational context was recently described in an article by Islam and Selim (2006), where the tone was one of slight dejection that e-learning is "still a dream for the less developed countries because of poor ICT infrastructure and other socioeconomic reasons" particularly in more rural areas. However, the difference in Bangladesh and Rwanda appears to be that, in the former country, presumably as in many other developing nations, the government still has to be convinced of the benefits of investments in ICT and education in

the face of so many urgent social problems to solve. Yet, in the literature, there are sound economic and social arguments for governments supporting initiatives that make education accessible to a greater number of their citizens.

Therefore hopefully this one small-scale example of continents 'coming together' can add to the body of support for educational initiatives in developing countries because, to quote Olakulein and Ojo (2006), in citing Azikwe (1992) and Ocholi (1999): "Studies over time have revealed that education is the most potent instrument for the emancipation of any group of people" and surely developing countries deserve emancipation from poverty and the current lack of educational and technological opportunity.

Whilst acknowledging that the Twese Hamwe project is still at a very early and experimental stage it is possible to reflect on the successful manner in which it has created an online learning platform that can benefit the education of teachers in a developing country at the same time as aspiring towards giving them the proprietorship of their own learning. This has been a key issue in literature related to the African context, as in the papers of Dzvimbo (2004) and Asmal (2004) as well as being raised within the political spectrum by figures such as President Mbeki of South Africa who is a proponent of computer-mediated distance learning being implemented across the African continent and managed by its own people.

Twese Hamwe offers evidence that it is possible for western agencies to establish projects that are initially based on partnership and collaboration and can eventually be passed into a state of total ownership by those developing countries who utilise the benefits of this evolving medium.

Yet, as in the writing of Asmal (2004) and Butcher (2004), there is a need to remember that one cannot assume that something which is successful in one context will work in another. All e-learning and development projects should be implemented on a case by case basis and there is a clear need for comparative studies as advocated in the work of Gourley (2004) and Keniston (2002) in writing about the Indian context which abounds with pilot projects that "almost never form part of any larger plan that includes thoughts about how they might be replicated on a larger scale." Keniston implies that a major factor in this is the fact that most of these projects are closed to scrutiny and invariably present assessments of their work as success stories "from which any trustworthy generalisations are impossible." (2002:5).

CONCLUSION

In this paper I am not laying any claim to the uncritical success of this project in Rwanda but rather showing an example of what can be implemented and achieved and how the knowledge gained from such small scale projects can be put to broader use in the field of e-learning and distance education if people pool their knowledge and allow the world to view their work in the naked light of honesty. Only then, in the face of centuries of damning evidence, can we prove to the developing world that we are striving to give of ourselves rather than taking from them. To conclude in the words of Yates (2004), speaking about the need for good teachers in developing countries, "If states are to retain effective control over their education systems and preserve their national identities, it is important that they prepare their teachers well as gatekeepers of culture and guardians of democracy." Rwanda and many other developing nations, in today's world, need such guardians of democracy in order to avoid ever again slipping back into the darkness of the past.

BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESSES of AUTHOR

Hello everyone, I am Paul and I am from a place called Fermanagh in Ireland. I am a qualified teacher of both native speakers and foreign students learning English.

I accepted my position with Seoul National University of Technology back in the spring of 2005 and started teaching in August. I am a career teacher with a genuine vocation for my profession and I fully endorse the modern teaching methods used by this university. I love the atmosphere of the campus and I am fully committed to the goals of the language program. I want to give every student the opportunity to converse in my classes and take an active role in their own education. Well, I grew up in Ireland and I have done a lot of studying in my life, especially the past couple of years. I come from a small town but now I have lived and worked in cities for half of my life.

I have taught in England, Ireland, Korea, Japan, Australia and even a few weeks in China. I do not compare countries. Each one was different, with a different set of experiences, although I had some of my best times in northern Australia.

Outside of work I love music, movies, travelling, photography and surfing the Internet. I also love reading but I have been doing a Masters in Educational Technology and that takes up most of my reading time. And do not ask me about favourites. I only have favourites when it comes to sport. I will read anything that is interesting and I will watch any movie that has a good storyline.

In terms of photography I have to say that I usually prefer taking pictures of people and places in natural poses. My musical tastes are diverse, but probably all quite mainstream, stuff that includes Guns and Roses, Jeff Buckley, U2, Johnny Cash, Bob Marley, Eric Clapton, David Bowie, Jimi Hendrix, Irish traditional and, when I am working or writing or studying I like having jazz or classical music playing in the background

Paum BREEN
Office 104, Language Center,
172 Kongneung-Do,
Nowon Gu, 139-743.
Seoul, REPUBLIC of KOREA
Phone: 010 7310 7631
Email: paulbbreen@hotmail.com

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